

# Working With Fathers in a Rural Community

By Zach Allen

Located just 30 minutes south of the Illinois state capitol, Springfield, Virden is a small rural community of approximately 3,400 residents. It is a quiet town consisting mainly of small businesses and many small- to medium-size farms. Before the downward spiral of the economy, it was also a mining town. The mine's closure displaced a large number of workers.

During my eight years working in Virden, from 2003 to 2010, the Virden School District – now newly consolidated as North Mac Community #34 – consisted of 96.8 percent Caucasian students with 41 percent of those students coming from low-income households. At the Virden Parent Place, the school district's Parents as Teachers program for children from birth to age 3, I worked with a variety of parents providing case management, crisis intervention, and parent education with their children through home visitations.

After a number of years working with a caseload of 20 families, I began to notice a trend: the lack of fathers present in the homes during my work. I began to question what our district could do to encourage the involvement of more fathers. After pondering this question, all the while doing little to nothing about the issue, I received an e-mail from our Parents as Teachers state leader. The e-mail was sent to all Illinois programs stating that the national center was looking to partner with a local program for a fatherhood initiative project. I jumped on the chance to be involved, and we later were chosen to participate in the fatherhood project.

Being selected was the easy part. I then began to wonder how I was going to get fathers involved in a town consisting of 3,400 people with few resources and a lack of public transportation. The month after we were chosen as one of the participating sites, the national center held a training for all selected programs around the country. The majority of the programs came from larger cities such as Pittsburgh and San Diego ... and there I sat from Virden, Ill., wondering, "How I am going to make this program work when these other larger cities have more resources?" With the support of the national center as well as the fatherhood coordinator at that time, Pam Leonard, I was able to think outside of the box and develop some strategies to encourage fatherhood participations in home visits, group connections, and family events.

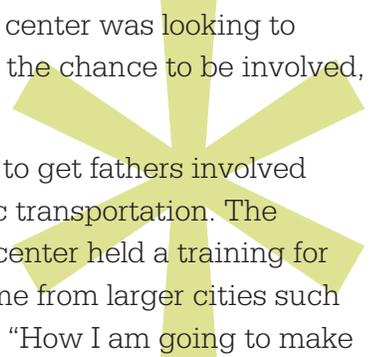
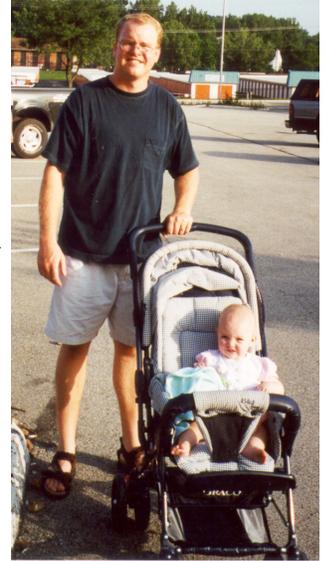
To make the fatherhood program a success in such a rural area, where small is the norm, it would be important to keep the group size at a maximum of 10 to 12 participants. The goal of the group was to make the participant fathers feel comfortable to share and learn. Prior to each group beginning, I would speak to the fathers about respect and the importance of confidentiality in the group.

## The recruitment

The first portion of my thinking revolved around the recruitment of fathers – where was I going to find the fathers and how was I going to convince them that this was worth their time. I started my



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recruitment with posting flyers around the community at gas stations, restaurants, the school district, and other locations. I knew I had to go where the dads go, but I also had to do more than post flyers. So I hit the pavement. I showed up at events where the dads would be – for example, dropping off and picking up their children from school and child care. I talked to the fathers about the important role they play in the lives of their children and about their children’s development.

As anticipated, some fathers bought into the information and others did not. To increase awareness of the importance of fatherhood involvement, I also talked to school officials and other community leaders. Believe it or not, some of these leaders did not have the best view of fathers due to their own experiences. That was another problem to combat for another day.

### The home visits

After getting a few dads involved, I would always schedule a home visit prior to the group connection to talk to them about some parent education or new child development information. These home visits allowed me to have one-on-one time with the father and his children and to answer any questions, concerns, or comments he may have had about any struggle that he or his family may have been facing.

### The group connections

The group connections consisted of no more than six to 12 dads. We also provided child care where the workers would provide developmentally appropriate activities for children ages infant through 5. During the group meetings we provided a meal for the fathers and their children.

The topics for the group connections were generated from the *24/7 Dad* curriculum produced by the National Fatherhood Initiative. The opening consisted of an ice breaker that helped the dads build relationships with one another and helped everyone feel more comfortable. The topics for the sessions ranged from dads’ family of origin to their involvement with their children to fathering and family roles, to name a few. The first meeting was always the hardest because everyone was so quiet, but as the weeks progressed the fathers started opening up more and more.

## Tips from the Field “Me and My Dad from the Beginning”

The PAT program at Providence SoundHomeCare and Hospice created three-ring “scrapbooks” which it presented to new fathers.

To make the books, staff members printed out Foundational Curriculum parent handouts relevant to a baby’s first year – about key topics like fatherhood, infant feeding, immunizations, child development, books, dental care, toys, bedtime routines, tummy time, crying, nursery rhymes, and more – and interspersed them with blank customizable pages on which fathers could journal, insert photos, or glue mementos from outings and trips. For durability, each page was enclosed in a plastic sheet protector.

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In the words of one staff member, the books were kid-oriented, colorful, and “simple but fun.”

The program’s staff surveyed fathers about their parenting knowledge when the books were presented and again after several months. They also tracked how many of the customizable pages fathers had completed. As a result, the books told the story of the baby’s and the father’s first year.

Information provided by Mary Brown and Jennifer A. Martin  
 Providence SoundHomeCare and Hospice  
 Olympia, Wash.

## Lessons learned

To help ease the burden to the fathers who lacked transportation, we started offering transportation to and from the group connections. To keep the fathers coming, we were able to offer incentives such as food, gas cards, and other modest items.

As the group leader and parent educator, I had to keep encouraging the fathers through some difficult times. Some of the group members were struggling with unemployment or relationship issues with their child’s mother, and a few struggled with crime involvement.

Setting the foundation of respect and confidentiality made the fathers feel comfortable and, in turn, made the groups a success. In addition, utilizing a research-based curriculum as well as providing weekly home visits a day or two before the group connections kept fathers engaged. Providing a meal for participants and their children also contributed to the groups’ success.

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Zach Allen, M.A., has worked in the education and human services field for eight-plus years, holding a variety of positions. He works at the [Collinsville Community Unit School District #10](#), holding the position of program coordinator for the pre-kindergarten at-risk program as well as the program for children birth to age 3, which utilizes the Parents as Teachers program.

He graduated in 2008 from the University of Illinois at Springfield with a B.A. in educational and developmental psychology. In 2010 he obtained an M.A. in human services with a focus on child and family relationships from the University of Illinois at Springfield. His research has focused on fatherhood involvement: His graduate thesis was titled *The Importance of Fathers: Creating Awareness for Well Meaning Professionals*.

Last updated: November 29, 2011